



Developing

Design

Sensibilities

Effective design thinking entails more than applying design methods. To produce the best outcomes, organizations need to develop – and trust – peoples’ design sensibilities.

● **DESIGN THINKING IS RECEIVING** a great deal of attention as increasing numbers of innovative organizations succeed in solving complex problems by creative means. In doing so, many of these firms implement specific ‘design methods’ such as observational research, iterative prototyping and storytelling alongside more mainstream approaches. But as any professional designer will attest, design thinking entails much more than applying *methods*: to create value, methods must be applied together with design *sensibilities*.

Design sensibilities consist of the ability to tap into intuitive qualities such as delight, beauty, personal meaning and cultural resonance. Such subtle qualities are difficult to put into words, and thus are generally discounted in the workplace. Managers schooled in

analytic and rational decision making may find the idea of relying on their sensibilities uncomfortable. But when coupled with design methods, design sensibilities create the experiences and outcomes upon which successful businesses capitalize: clear distinction from competitors, lasting market impact and customer loyalty.

Cultivating Sensibilities

Innovation involves making multiple judgment calls about *what to express* and *how*, from a project’s big strategic idea to the fine details of implementation. Sensibilities not only guide these decisions, they also ultimately influence how people experience the resulting product, service or brand. Will customers simply end up getting something that ‘works’, or will they make an emotional connection

with it – one that entails personal and cultural relevance and inspires future loyalty?

Take the case of Altoids mints, a favourite example of our colleague **Claudia Kotchka**, an accountant-turned-design thinker who spent more than three decades at **Procter & Gamble** and now works as a consultant. In the mid-1990s, Altoids turned a 200-year-old British stomach remedy into a leading global breath mint by reinventing its packaging (the now-iconic tin). Kotchka often uses this example to demonstrate the importance of design sensibilities to skeptical business teams.

She begins by holding up a tin of Altoids to highlight the product's many subtle design qualities – soft corners, rolled edges, nostalgic typeface, debossed graphics, crinkly paper liner, even the irregularly shaped and dusty sweets inside – that combine to create the product's appeal and sense of authenticity. Then, as chronicled in a *Fast Company* article, she enacts a more typical approach, which might have happened if, say, the pre-Kotchka P&G were to take over the brand:

“We’re gonna get rid of this stupid paper – it’s serving no functional purpose.” She plops the tin on the table and picks up another product, unable to suppress a mischievous smile. “And this is what you get.” Kotchka then reveals ‘Proctoids’, a box made of cheap white plastic from P&G’s baby-wipe containers. With uniform beige ovals jammed into the container, fewer colours on the lid, and no paper, Proctoids taste like Altoids, but they look as appealing as a pile of horse pills. Gone is the pleasure people get when they buy Altoids. Gone, too, is the up to 400 per cent premium they pay. “That’s what design is,” she says. “That’s what designers do.”

Just as designers call upon their sensibilities to imagine and create an experience like Altoids, consumers tap into their sensibilities to enjoy it. Clearly, going beyond purely functional solutions to achieve emotionally-resonant ones takes more than analysis and measurement, but it also takes more than applying design methods. It takes design sensibilities – judgments informed by sharp intuition – to bring myriad subjective, complex and subtle qualities together into a meaningful whole.

Professional designers have invested considerable time and effort in practicing this kind of integration and refining their sensibilities in particular ways. In doing so, they become skilled at synthesizing different factors – what’s viable, feasible, desirable, sustainable, etc. – and considering multiple permutations of potential design elements to reach an elegant, holistic solution.

How Designers See

Although every designer brings a unique perspective to the table, they generally engage with the world in similar ways. Keenly aware of their surroundings, their observations inform and inspire their work, often in delicate ways.

Professional designers hold a special responsibility because they are charged with both *sensing* opportunities for change and then *expressing* that change by manipulating elements to effect that change. The first of these responsibilities – *sensing* – is a way of looking at the people, places and things around us. For instance, have

you ever tried to view the world from someone else’s perspective? Perhaps you’ve taken a city tour with an architect, admired woodwork with the guidance of a skilled carpenter, or watched a movie with a video artist? In all likelihood, their observations were quite different from yours. Designers’ perceptions reflect an awareness that our surroundings are created, and of the artistry that goes into their creation. Designers see physical, cultural and metaphoric relationships, such as the nooks and crannies where people naturally gather and the exposed spaces that people avoid, as well as the atmospheres (*welcoming* vs. *cold*) that those tendencies create. Designers notice the relative placement of graphical elements and materials in the form of an object and the sensations, memories (melancholic or joyful) and behaviours to which these give rise. In short, they are acutely aware of minute details and how small elements add up to a holistic experience.

Designers also bring a critical eye, detecting and sometimes becoming offended at designs that don’t work – where details have been overlooked or dismissed as unimportant and thus undermine more positive possibilities. Perhaps it’s a product package whose form and material contradict the verbal message it is trying to convey about freshness or simplicity; perhaps it’s a hotel that intends to welcome guests at their journey’s end with a calming experience, but instead sends them through a maze of unfamiliar distractions to find their rooms. Designers are able to reframe these misfires as opportunities to rethink the approach and carry through on a promise in a more effective, genuine way.

The second design responsibility – *expressing* – is a means of creating change by exploiting these perceptions. By valuing and sharing their observations simply because they seem beautiful, intriguing, offensive or amusing, designers enrich their intuitions. Their own subjective awareness of how particular attributes evoke a sense of beauty, intrigue, ire, or amusement informs the choices that they make regarding how best to express those qualities in any given design. In using *their* sensibilities, designers connect to *our* sensibilities and enrich our experience, even when we’re not consciously aware of it.

Most professionals easily recognize the practical benefits of a product or service, but they often overlook the less-apparent qualities of an experience from which they derive pleasure, identity, and meaning. For example, while industrial designer **Jason Robinson**, a colleague of ours, was conceiving a new generation of surgical instruments, he met with various surgeons who would ultimately use these intricate power tools. “All the talk was focused on functional aspects of the procedure – that and the ergonomics of holding the tools,” he recalls. “[They said] nothing about the way their tools represented them as professionals or said something about their technical skill and achievements.”

Robinson describes later walking through the hospital’s parking garage, where one surgeon’s new top-of-the-line **Audi** caught his eye. Chatting with the doctor about this new purchase, it was clear to Robinson that the choice of car reflected an appreciation for quality and comfort, and pleasure in fine materials and precision engineering. Robinson considered other surgeons’ everyday

Balancing Design Methods and Design Sensibilities



experience of opening and closing the doors of their Audis and Mercedes. “It seemed obvious to me that they cared not just about the look and feel of the car, but how it made them feel about themselves,” he says. “I thought about that a lot in selecting the materials and finishes for their work tools, certain that they would appreciate the same kind of qualities in their tools.”

Designers use observation and prototyping methods of different kinds to help them figure out the best ways to express certain sensibilities. With sketches and models, they try things out to explore their effects, experimenting with physical elements (finishes, forms, fonts, materials) and control sensory inputs (contrast, rhythm, sound, space, pattern, pace) to determine what works and what doesn’t. And, ultimately, they discover how to deliberately evoke particular feelings to support the desired experience.

Finding the right solution means experimenting with the right factors. This requires designers to choose, at a very detailed level, which of the many possible elements and qualities to explore – and how. At the same time, they must keep an eye on the bigger picture, from the context and meaning of an activity in people’s lives and culture to the promise of a product, service or brand. Last but not least, they must synthesize all of the above into a highly resolved, integrated whole.

Sensibilities Make Good Business Sense

Design sensibilities can be realized in straightforward products, such as breath mints and surgical tools, or extended to much more complex challenges, such as the extension of a new service or brand that unfolds over time. Like skilled designers, successful organizations package their offerings as integrated wholes, fitting all the little details into a greater context that supports a meaningful experience and satisfies customers’ senses.

Starbucks is a pioneer at this. You’re probably familiar with the coffee giant’s story and the effect it’s had on **McDonald’s**, **Dunkin Donuts** and multitudes of micro-roasters. Many competitors have tried to replicate Starbucks’ success by adopting isolated elements of its customer experience: they sell better coffee made from better beans, or they change the colour palette of their retail environment; but they can’t duplicate the magic of the integrated whole.

Starbucks’ success is largely due to its ability to design for our functional and emotional needs, generating goods and services that we not only consume but have made part of our daily routines and personal identities. It has choreographed an elegantly resolved system of experience touch points, from manageable activities (like the design, sourcing and manufacturing of their products;

distribution; pricing; and advertising) to less wieldy ones (like fan sites, community use, and a sense of place). It designed elements that defined multiple means by which the Starbucks experience could intersect with our lives.

Ironically, after its initial success, Starbucks temporarily fell into the same trap as its copycats: the company's aggressive pursuit of growth led to formulaic duplication that eventually prompted a cultural backlash and caused stock prices to plummet. In January 2008, founder **Howard Schultz** was reinstated as CEO and Starbucks appears to be back on track, thanks to tactics like cost-cutting and a return to its original design sensibilities. In a recent *New York Times* article about the rebound, Schultz uttered phrases like "the authenticity of the coffee experience" and "the theatre of bringing that to life" in describing the Starbucks experience. He told *The Guardian* that his past mistakes included "a loss of the romance of coffee-making."

Reviving its design sensibilities for romance and theater, Starbucks opened **15th Ave. Coffee & Tea** in Seattle last summer. The boutique store aims to take the company back to its roots as a community-owned venue and to help it "re-learn" about itself. The

space's design draws from its Pike Place roots – Starbucks calls it "eclectic and raw" – and features repurposed materials from nearby abandoned buildings, shipyards and Starbucks outlets. The menu was changed to emphasize slow food and to include beer and wine. Now, when customers buy a cup of joe, they get a small-batch brew that tastes great, a story about history and economic fairness, a sense of place and community, access to peer-selected news and music, and a reminder of hometown success. The verdict is still out on whether these latest moves will quell the backlash from their missteps, but it's clearly a good start.

Wayfinding through sensibility is difficult in a management culture that measures progress by execution and results – typically numbers – as Starbucks has found. This is why it is so tempting to misapply design thinking and cling to design methods that focus on performance benchmarks. Yes, observational research and iterative prototyping produce quantifiable and tangible results and they are easily teachable. But without design sensibilities, design thinking runs the risk of addressing only functional concerns and falling short in issues of desirability. To address these subjective concerns, organizations must shift their focus from *what* to *how* and pursue

Design Sensibilities in Action

Virgin America has differentiated itself from its competitors by providing customers with a rich set of experiences based on design sensibilities, such as luxury and style, which have been applied to its service scripts, amenities, industrial and environmental design and more. Its holistic approach is evident from the moment a passenger checks in.

Virgin's self-serve kiosks feature the same design aesthetic as the interiors of its planes. Each computer's glossy white chassis and glowing red interface foreshadows the seating and personal entertainment systems offered in the main cabin. When passengers check in, the kiosk prints credit card-size boarding pass for each one, VIP-style, which elevates the boarding process from an informational transaction to an event. While other airlines settle for a tissue-thin paper receipts, Virgin issues a permit that suggests travelers will be treat-

ed well on their journey.

At the gate, a pilot greets passengers in the waiting area while the gate agent announces that correct answers to his upcoming trivia questions will be rewarded with pre-boarding privileges. When it's time to go, a Virgin employee calls for late passengers in language that reveals sensibility: "We don't want to leave you," he says, not "The door is closing and you will be left behind."

Boarding is another signature moment. The end of the jet bridge reveals a violet and pink glow emitting from the cabin entrance. It's the first stage of the mood lighting that shifts throughout a six hour flight. Onboard, interactive touch screens at each seat enable passengers to order food, drinks and entertainment anytime, helping travelers feel as if they're flying first-class even when they're in economy. The leather seats are housed in a glossy white shell – remember

the kiosk – that underscores style and VIP treatment. The tray tables are made of the same material and emerge from their locked positions with a satisfying click. In the midst of these moments, it's hard not to be transferred to glamorous Hollywood depictions of space travel.

What Virgin is doing is not new: all airlines are trying to compete with better experiences. In such a commoditized industry, what else is there? However, how Virgin is doing this is new. Design methods tell you what to do, but design sensibilities tell you how. The traveling public is responding with approval – check out their four out of five star rating on Yelp.com. And though many factors contribute to financial results, indications are that this is translating into good business: the start-up airline posted a Q4 2009 operating profit and 40 per cent year-over-year revenue increase.
–Jane Fulton Suri and Michael Hendrix

meaningful connections with consumers. This will inspire functional and emotional design solutions that reach their full potential and inspire loyalty.

Developing Design Sensibilities

Obviously, expressing design sensibilities comes more easily to designers than to other professionals. As Claudia Kotchka told us in a recent conversation, “Designers speak a language that includes visual, tactile, multi-sensorial elements, and [they] are able to use these elements to say something that will evoke a specific kind of response. That’s what designers go to school for.”

We aren’t proposing that you send your people to design school so they can learn to express their sensibilities. We are suggesting that you develop the design sensibilities of your employees as a business asset with two important benefits: more refined intuitions about the needs and desires of your customers and greater confidence in making intuitive judgments to resolve complex problems with well-rounded solutions.

We all have colleagues who embody certain sensibilities, from being a *stylish* dresser to a *gracious* host. We appreciate and are impressed by the fine distinctions they are able to make when buying a new suit or planning an important dinner party – and how their nuanced insights enhance our enjoyment. But in traditional business culture, intuitive abilities such as these are typically thought of as side or recreational interests, and their value in the context of people’s work lives is often overlooked. We recently watched an executive do just that. During a client meeting, a vice president asked us how she might create a viral video campaign. Someone on her team volunteered that he had film experience and would love to contribute in some way. She dismissed his comment, and the conversation continued, even though he may have had valuable skills to apply. Why didn’t his offer lead anywhere? The VP’s perception of his abilities and contribution were constrained to *functional execution* rather than *enriching contribution*.

In her various corporate brand-development roles, **Ivy Ross**, executive vice president of marketing for **The Gap**, has excelled at cultivating the design sensibilities of her colleagues. Ross says one of the most important sensibilities “comes from seeing things deeply in the moment, really paying attention, and taking it in at a visceral level.” At one point, Ross invited a guest to take her cross-functional team through a Japanese tea ceremony, with full explanations of each part of the ritual. She wanted to make them slow down and focus on the details, the relationships between elements, and the specific meaning of each. Her real intent, of course, was to help them become more attuned to noticing the details of everyday activities, objects, rituals and meanings.

In a similar vein, The Brand Academy at **BMW Welt** in

Munich has a program to teach stakeholders about the car maker’s brands and how they take root in culture. Its intent is to foster design sensibilities as they apply to particular markets. The Academy, led by **Hildegard Wortmann**, vice president of product management for the X and Z Series, created an exhibition that includes rooms dedicated to communicating the brand values of BMW, Mini Cooper and Rolls Royce. Teams are guided through multiple workshops to attune their sensibilities, experientially and viscerally, to the core values of each brand. When asked how she pulled this off in a company known for an ultra-rational approach, Wortmann chuckled and said, “It took a lot of convincing.” But convinced they were: the Brand Academy has been embedded as a core element of BMW’s corporate curriculum for the last three years.

For those of us caught up in frantic pace of modern business, taking the time to encourage staff to develop and exercise their hidden talents may seem frivolous and over-indulgent. But when fostered and encouraged, employees’ latent capabilities allow for more effective design thinking. Exploring and honing sensibilities is a powerful means to developing greater awareness of how your product, service or brand is experienced and to recognize opportunities for how it might grow.

In closing

Design sensibilities are essentially human sensibilities, although they are largely underdeveloped and undervalued in many traditional business settings. Like design methods, design sensibilities are learnable – although it takes encouragement, respect and discipline to fully develop them.

As demonstrated by innovations from Altoids to Virgin America, the key to design thinking is to balance methods with sensibilities. Investing in peoples’ ability to make good judgment calls about the details that affect customer perceptions and experience makes good business sense. Design sensibilities enable managers to determine not only *what* to do, but *how* to do it. Combining design methods with strong design sensibilities is a sure way to avoid ending up with a box of mints that taste good, but that no one wants. **R**



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